The North American Touring T's — a group that tours America for weeks at a time in fully restored Model Ts — recently stopped at Idaho National Laboratory's Experimental Breeder Reactor-I. (Photo credit: Arco Advertiser)

Model T touring group visits INL's historic reactor

By Kortny Rolston, *INL Communications & Governmental Affairs*

Driving 200 miles a day in a Model T that tops out at 45 mph isn't easy. The vintage automobiles aren't equipped with modern amenities like full suspension or air conditioning.

So when members of the North American Touring T's organize weeks-long drives, they schedule a few pit stops each day. It's even better if the site is historic.

That's how the T's ended up spending a recent Saturday afternoon at Idaho National Laboratory's Experimental Breeder Reactor-I (EBR-I), the birthplace of nuclear energy. The reactor was the first to create a usable amount of nuclear energy and light bulbs using nuclear fission.

EBR-I, where light bulbs were first lit using nuclear fission, is now a National Historic Landmark.

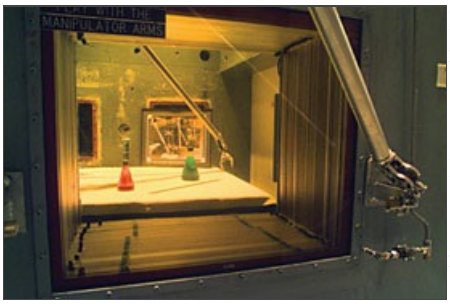
"We like to combine activities and driving so we try to stop and see different things," said Joss Sanderson, an Arizona resident who organized the three-week tour through Wyoming, Montana and Idaho. "This is a good place for us to visit. It helps break up our trip and we get to see something interesting."

Sanderson was particularly interested in visiting EBR-I. As a child, he often accompanied his father, a nuclear engineer, on business trips to eastern Idaho and INL. And as a retired history professor, the significance of the site interested him.

So he made sure to include it as a stop between Hailey, Idaho, and Idaho Falls when plotting the 2,300-mile route last spring. He contacted INL Tour Coordinator Don Miley about opening the National Historic Landmark for them — their mid-September trip fell outside the museum's Memorial Day to Labor Day season.

"Not many people are aware of where nuclear energy was invented," Sanderson said.

The afternoon at EBR-I was a homecoming of sorts for fellow Model T enthusiast Darryl Erickson. He lived in Arco from 1949 to 1953 while his dad worked at INL instructing others on tungsten inert gas (TIG) welding techniques.



EBR-I visitors can see the hot cells engineers used to study nuclear materials.

Erickson is unsure whether his dad was present on Dec. 20, 1951, the day crews produced enough nuclear energy to power four light bulbs. But he said his dad spent much of his time at EBR-I.

"My father might have made some of these welds," he said.

For Carol Sanford, a Colorado resident, it was an opportunity to view something new.

She and her husband had never been to EBR-I, spent much time in eastern Idaho or really seen a nuclear reactor.

"I think the future is still in nuclear," she said. "We have such a fear of it in this country, but they've come a long way with making it safe."

Take a video tour of EBR-I here: http://tinyurl.com/visitebr-1.

Feature Archive